

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 009

CS 204 673

AUTHOR Smedman, M. Sarah
TITLE Competency Based Tests: Their Implications for Goals of Composition Courses.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Educational Objectives; *English Instruction; *Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; Secondary Education; Student Evaluation; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Competency testing in composition fixes goals that convey to students, teachers, parents, and the general public inaccurate notions about the nature of composition and what competency in writing comprises. The trend toward competency testing comes from the public's realization that many high school and college graduates are functionally illiterate. Concomitant with that trend has been the demand for a return to the basics. Unfortunately, this concept of competence fails to promote the role of thought in writing and denies the writer the privilege of making conceptual decisions. Even competency tests that include writing short essays do not allow the imperfect groping that is part of the composing process, cannot measure all aspects of a student's experience in English, and confuse goals with norms, thus reducing both testing and teaching to the lowest acceptable level. The word "competency" implies behavioral objectives without overtones of the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, growth in appreciation, or the development of taste. (TJ)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED168009

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

COMPETENCY BASED TESTS:
THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR GOALS OF COMPOSITION COURSES

For Panel: Competency Based Tests and
Implications for Basic Writing Programs.
Annual Conference on College Composition
and Communication, March 30-April 1, 1978,
Denver, Colorado

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Sarah Smedman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

M. Sarah Smedman
Asst. Professor of English
UNC-Charlotte
Charlotte, North Carolina

CS204673

When it was first suggested that I participate in this panel on competency-based testing and its impact on writing programs, I was reluctant to do so because of an undefined ambivalence toward narrowly objectifying any competence and a humanistic distrust of behavioral objectives. However, I have been writing and teaching writing long enough to be convinced that composition is both the core and the canker of the educational process. A quick think makes it plain that if those who teach writing and teachers of writing fail to discern their positions on an issue so vital to their personal and professional well-being, administrators and test-peddlers will impose a policy on them. Then, too, an investigation into competency-based testing might lead to the establishment of meritorious goals that would make it possible for composition teachers to specify more exactly what it is that is taught and therefore help them to get it across more clearly. In fact, competency testing will fix goals for composition classes, but those goals, I posit, will be wrong, discordant because they convey to students, to teachers, to parents, and to the general public inaccurate notions about both the nature of composition and what competence in writing comprises.

At this stage in my thinking, most of what I have to say applies to competency-based testing as a means of evaluation divorced from an integrated educational program. What I know of the latter

leads me to believe that some of the objections I have to isolated testing do apply to, but others are obviated by, thoughtfully planned and conscientiously executed competency-based college programs. Here I am speaking about standardized tests administered broadly--whether on a national or only on a city-county or campus-wide basis--which have been constructed independently of and with little regard for individual, local programs. These may have been constructed by a panel of highly-reputed teachers from within a school system or purchased from a company, which, despite its concern for validity and reliability, is primarily interested in selling tests as widely as possible.

The trend toward competency testing has come primarily from the public's realization that many students graduating from high schools and even from colleges are functionally illiterate. Concomitant with that trend has been the clamor for a return to the basics, informed by only ambiguous opinions of what those basics are. The interpretation that what constitutes them is whatever is measured by the competency tests is an inevitable misinterpretation but one with detrimental implications. The tests tend to measure those aspects of composition which are most easily verifiable. Consequently, "the basics" has come to mean for many spelling, punctuation, conventional usage, and syntax. Mastery of surface features of the language passes, then, for competence in writing, even when such mastery is mindlessly mechanical.

Such a concept of competence fails to penetrate to the essence of composition, which has got to include the intellectual and emotional

processes which underlie and generate language. Tacitly negating the importance of learning to write by writing, objective tests deemphasize the role of thought in composition and deny the writer the privilege and responsibility of making all the conceptual decisions inherent in the process. They disseminate the impression that good writing is the mastery of rules of correctness, which, when learned, can be applied unreflectively and universally.

That impression is even now tenaciously fixated in the popular mind, often even taught in the schools. An intelligent freshman in my literature-based composition course tells me that her attitude toward her studies, her family, and life in general has been transformed through that class' by her discovery¹ that it does matter what she thinks and that she can advance reasons, logical and intuitive, to explain why she thinks as she does. After years of hating English violently, she learned to her amazement that poetry and fiction really can have implications for her own life and she is eager to explain what they mean and why. The once hateful task of writing a paper has become exhilarating. After years of grammar drills and diagramming sentences, between which activities and her own writing she could see no connection, this student now goes voluntarily to our Writing Resource Center to get help with the syntactical and mechanical aspects of writing. She is committed now to carefully crafting a form through which she can communicate clearly ideas she is convinced make a difference. From another sector: critic John Simon, in his column on English usage in the March 1 issue of Esquire, deploras the passing from the American scene of excellence in the use of written language.¹ His

belligerent desire to preserve the pristine purity of language inspires a bitter attack on college professors who condone "unsavory euphemisms" like senior citizens and colloquialisms approved by authorities from Shakespeare to J. N. Hook in English Today, for example, like used as a conjunction, as in "It sounds like I know what I'm doing." Simon laments the "fashionable" death of the subjunctive, maintaining that "still, it requires fairly porcine ears not to be jarred by 'as though he was a character'." He has a point when he charges that the present lowering of intellectual and aesthetic standards constitutes a unified attack not only on excellence but even on competence. Some of his examples do support his charge that the language of those who teach writing is subliterate. However, the notion that both competence and excellence are embodied in an elitist correctness imbues, and finally undermines, his thesis. Yet, how many readers will see through Simon's sophisticated glibness and how many will be manipulated by his impassioned cleverness into adopting his argument as unadulterated truth?

Writing is the fundamental mode of learning. In a statement central to his philosophy, Michael Polanyi says, "I believe that in spite of all the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings." Sam Watson, commenting on that statement, points out that though it may seem modest, it is utterly crucial. It is, says Watson, "a statement of belief, which the objectivist exorcises from the realm of knowledge; it signals an acceptance of responsibility, which under objectivism seems hypocritical or naïve; it acknowledges hazards, whereas objectivist methodology assures certainty; it promises

actively to seek, rather than passively to observe; and it seeks truth, rather than convenient summaries of observations."² The major goal of any composition course ought to be teach that writing is a mode of responsible intellectual searching and a means to compelling expression of the findings, even if they be only small truths, perhaps only a single transitory one which will give way under the assault of the next assignment, but one of which the writer is at least temporarily convinced.

The competency tests with which I am familiar are not based upon the foregoing conception of composition and, therefore, are not likely to lead to the clarification of goals appropriate to a course which will deliberately and actively teach students to become good writers.

I am not unmindful of the component of some current tests which requires students, in addition to blackening the box which indicates the correct answer, to write one, even two, short essays, which are then read holistically by multiple readers. These tests do ask students to demonstrate their ability to employ the elements of what Wayne Booth calls the "rhetorical stance." In a controlled context students have to identify and create the personae from which they will write, to discover and disclose what they think about their subject, and to show an awareness of the audience for whom they write. They must show that they can organize and articulate efficiently. Essay tests which make these demands upon students do, of course, convey the idea that one proves competency in writing by writing. That several professionals with different concepts of what is essential to the writing process are asked to read each essay and that the evaluation

of that essay is a consensus acknowledges that there is something in the composition process which eludes measurement by a single set of criteria. Though the practice of having multiple readers seems a sensible safeguard against the student's being misjudged, it does suggest a couple of nice ironies: viz. that the capability of any single expert for making a reliable evaluation is questionable; and that, on the other hand, the individual novice has to demonstrate sufficient understanding of and skill in writing to satisfy a panel of professionals.

Nonetheless, this type of test does provide a much more satisfactory measurement. However, it ought never be used as the sole means of determining whether or not a student will receive a high school diploma nor a college degree. Although such tests imply that ability to deal creatively with ideas and express them in an aesthetically pleasing style is part of competent writing, they do not take cognizance of two vital factors: 1) that only superficial opinions come off the top of the head; significant thought needs time to lie fallow, to germinate, to cross-breed, to grow before it bears fruit; and 2) that no kind of groping is perfect; therefore, thought in the process of being formulated is not likely to be expressed in a style either aesthetically pleasing or mechanically perfect.

In his book, National Assessment and the Teaching of English, John Mellon reminds evaluators and teachers that growth in writing ability is consistently marked by errors.³ Consequently, we should resist the temptation to label a writer whose work still has mechanical or syntactical mistakes as incompetent, especially when the work in question is one sample produced in a test situation.

Common Sense and Testing in English, the report of the NCTE task force on Measurement and Evaluation, reenforces convictions that may be flagging under current questioning by administrators, school boards, and the general public in the wake of competency tests. The report restates a truism: "Although English teachers should accept those standardized tests that validly measure what they are teaching, they should insist that these tests cannot measure all aspects of students' wide range of experience in English, and that they signally fail to measure many of those aspects deemed most important by teachers."⁴ Regular and periodic assessment by the teacher of students' composing abilities is a necessary counterpart to test results in deciding whether or not an individual receives a diploma. An objective reader would hardly consider good writing what appeared on a recent course test. The following sentence is representative: "the lady's husband who died sister did not want to tell the lady of her husband's death because of her heart condition." As an isolated sample of writing, this one produced in a stress situation by a student anxious to do well does not indicate either the student's usual perspicacity nor her growing ability to compose which the papers she regularly writes for class do.

We all know that the relationship between teaching and testing is two-way. Teachers set goals to insure that their students can pass tests--course tests and standardized national tests. Inversely, tests determine what the teacher will teach. Either way, when test results are poor, the assumption that goals have not been met prevails. Undoubtedly, the first blame for any significant failure rate on

competency tests will be meted out to teachers. It is just that the public hold teachers accountable for doing their jobs well. It is not sufficient that they judge the excellence of the latter's performance by the results of a single test whose goals have not been validated nor that they attribute more value to those test results than to other means of assessment by the individual teacher.

A noxious corollary: when test results are good, the assumption is that goals have been met and the state of education is healthy, the schools are doing their work. An imminent danger from competency tests is the confusion of goals with norms. Instead of aiming at what the average individual might achieve under the best possible conditions, competencies tend to be set at a minimal-skills level. In a February 27th news release, Governor Hunt said he thought most North Carolinians would say high school graduates should have mastered at least ninth-grade skills.⁵ It is my understanding that the trial tests in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system are based on the sixth grade level; Denver's and Florida's tests, on the eighth grade level. To equate having passed those tests with having gained a high school education would be degrading. Still, where class rooms are crowded and no more than token attention is paid toward challenging the gifted, it is only too probable that goals will be lowered to no more than what competency tests demand and that psychic and economic resources will be directed full force toward helping the least capable students pass minimal-skills tests, thus restricting the aims of education to producing the even-less-than-mediocre. Case in point: recently a student-teacher in one of the Charlotte senior high schools told me that as a result of a "trial-run" compe-

tency test given to tenth-graders, all the student-teachers in his school have been given the task of designing and executing units to bring those students who failed closer to, preferably up to, competency level. Young teachers are being told by their administrators to tool their lessons to basic-skills tests.

A resultant implication for college composition courses is plain. We will be getting many students who can fill in the blanks on a job application and perhaps even write a brief essay, according to formula, about their personal history and career aspirations. ^{They are not educated..} This may, perhaps, be more than many can do today, though my experience does not bear out so sad a state. Nor do today's freshmen come to college assuming that, despite their lack of skill in thinking and writing, they have been certified as competent citizens.

Reflecting what I am sure is not an uncommon disposition, a harried sixth-grade teacher accounted to the parents of an up-til-now "A-B" student for his recent failure by saying that since he was bright, she had depended on him to get along by himself because she had to work with the remedial students to bring them up to grade. Even the brightest students need external motivation and direction for their intellectual development. Not to provide that stimulation is a condemnable waste which will pollute our social and political milieu. To overstate the importance of motivation in writing and in the assessment of writing is not possible. One gives of oneself that which is required to write an effective composition only if one is convinced that the task justifies the requisite involvement. "Yet how often do we as classroom teachers," as Mellon says, "merely 'give

out' composition assignments to students, with no more thought to their motivational levels^{than} that they will write simply because they have to?"⁶ When goals are leveled to minimal-skills norms, the teacher's already deficient regard for motivation will not increase. What premium will be offered to coax students into investing themselves in a difficult, risky venture?

Not to be concerned with students' motivation to write is to forget what we have learned of the engagement of the whole person in the act of composition. Personally, I have never been able to subscribe to the theory that writing is nothing more than self-expression and that conventional formalities do not signify. Structure and mechanics are part and parcel of good writing. But so, too, are feelings and intuitions.

Another foreseeable result of low test scores, antithetical to reducing requirements so that everyone can, with little effort, fulfill them is the return to a practice that has in the past given ample evidence of its inadequacy, i.e. retaining students in a lower grade until they have learned the designated material. A federal report compiled by a panel of nine leading educators released earlier this month criticizes the use of competency tests as a high school graduation requirement because, like the practice of failing students, it "will create more social problems than it can conceivably solve."⁷

A feature common to sequential programs built on the principle of educating for designated competences is the separation of functions traditionally regarded as part of teaching: the framing of objectives, instruction, and evaluation. In some institutions, the faculty are

are actively involved in all three functions. In others, devising the desired educational outcomes and testing for them are activities discharged by non-teaching personnel, such as administrators and consultants. According to the observations of Peter Elbow, who has systematically studied several competency-based educational programs, most people who have thought very hard about CBE feel strongly, that not only should teachers not have the prerogative, as traditionally they have, of deciding what is to be learned and how that is to be evaluated, but that educational institutions have the obligation to go into the non-academic world to determine whether their objectives are valid and how their achievement is to be measured.⁸ When such convictions are translated into practice, teaching gets severed from goal-setting and testing. Teachers become technicians, conceivably even working from lesson-plans devised by others to attain objectives not of their own deliberation. Such a practice robs teachers of their incentive. It will hardly satisfy the idealistic and creative urges which have led most scholars into the profession nor will it allow them an area large enough to give their knowledge and intelligence active play. CBE programs, then, are quite likely to offer courses taught by non-scholars, people whose qualifications derive either from their success in various jobs outside the university or in their ability to function unimaginatively as instructional robots. Elbow also notes that CBE does tend to place more responsibility on the student for achieving the competencies handed to him and, consequently, to nullify the role of the teacher in the whole educational process. To accomplish the former is good; to accomplish the latter is to ignore

the importance of the stimulation the learner receives from thoughtful exchange of ideas with professional scholars. Schools, of course, need to benefit from the expertise of men and women operating successfully in the world outside their boundaries. But, schools are microcosms, more than the ivory towers they are popularly reputed to be. Scholars also function, usually more than adequately, outside the university. Their mission to keep subjective thought alive in the modern world is essential to the preservation of humaneness in that world. To take teaching out of the hands of scholars and intellectuals will be to denigrate, then to eradicate, consideration of ideas, reflection on their relation to oneself, and, finally, self-judgment and judgment of one's world.

In some CBE programs, careful attention has been given to distinguishing and articulating as precisely as possible exactly what it is they desire to teach. That provides a model for all teachers to emulate. Despite the fact that certain desirable goals of instruction still elude our ability to measure them scientifically--for example, the nature and degree of an individual's appreciation of a novel or a journal article--too many teachers of composition take unwarranted refuge under the immensity of the task before them and aim only casually and vaguely at "producing competent writers." On the other hand, the precise goals enumerated by CBE programs, such as that at Mars Hill College, tend to send us back to teaching in composition classes the same kinds of things we have been teaching for years with little conviction about their effectiveness and, perhaps, less inquiry into why they have not achieved more. We do work very hard. We do

resort to complaining about lazy and dull students. We do get discouraged. Competency-based testing offers little relief, for it threatens to restore grammar drills and sentence diagrams, which we know do not carry over into most students' writing. Such testing does not promise to turn us toward the discoveries of the new rhetoricians, which do offer answers to many of our current problems.

The very name competency suggests no more than a mastery of skills, a mere behavioral objective, with no overtones connoting the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake, growth in appreciation, nor the development of taste. Specifically, the phrase competence in writing does not connote that writing, which can be an end in itself, is at the same time the most useful means to an education, for in the words of the humanist Ronald Berman, "what writing does is allow judgment of the self" because "it does, after all, have to translate feeling and intuition into statement, and that procedure underlies everything in the life of the mind."⁹

Notes

- ¹"Teacher, Heal Thy Self," Esquire, 1 March 1978, pp. 37-39.
Personal Knowledge, p. 299. Quoted in Watson,
- ²"Discoursing Tacitly or Back to the Wrong Basics," p. 7.
Paper presented at the annual CCCC, March 25-27, 1976, Philadelphia.
- ³(Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), pp. 32-33.
- ⁴(Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), p. 15.
- ⁵Mark Nadler, "We Have Failed'," Charlotte Observer, 27 Feb. 1978, 1A, 5A col. 1.
- ⁶"National Assessment and the Teaching of English," p. 34.
- ⁷Mark Nadler, "Competency Test Criticism Draws Boos, Cheers," Charlotte Observer, 1C, 14C col. 1.
- ⁸CBE and Teaching. Through Sam Watson I was fortunate to have access to a draft of Elbow's work in preparation on his study of competency-based college programs.
- ⁹"The Importance of Teaching Writing, Minneapolis Tribune, 11 February 1978, 8A.